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ABSTRACT

Designed for use as supplementary instructional material in a cultural anthropology course, this learning module focuses on the purposes and methods of anthropological fieldwork, and provides an overview of the types of research in which anthropologists engage during their field studies. The module begins by discussing the purpose of participant observation as a means of penetrating the most visible traits of a culture in order to understand the various social relationships and institutional complexes underpinning social structure. Academic preparation, a comprehension of language, and offical permission, as well as permission from the subject group, are then highlighted as important prerequisites in conducting field studies. The module also discusses moral and ethical questions involved in conducting fieldwork, such as the researchers' responsibility for presenting a realistic account of current conditions among a population along with the more specific findings of the research. The next section focuses on the common tools and techniques of the anthropologist, including census taking and area mapping, interviews, kinship records, psychological tests, and video and audio recordings. Finally, the module contrasts journals, the traditional tool of anthropologists, with computers, and underscores the importance of a knowledge of statistical analysis and methodologies. Performance activities covering the content of the module are appended. (EJV)

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# Fieldwork

## A Modular Approach

Cultural Anthropology
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# FIELDWORK

Introduction:

This module has been prepared as a guide to a specific area within Cultural Anthropology. Your task will be to read the materials, perform the tasks at the end of the module, and to cross check your answers with the information in the module upon completion of the performance activities. It will be your responsibility to keep up with the reading assignments in the textbook, and to take lecture notes,and film notes.

The module is designed to give you a basis for mastering a specific amount of information, and has been field tested with over 1000 students who have demonstrated by their performance on examinations, that the modular approach can increase the probability of student mastery. The theoretical perspective which is employed is based upon cognitive psychology, gestalt psychology, behaviorism and programmed learning.

This particular module covers the area of Anthropological Fieldwork and gives an overview of the types of research which anthropologists engage in, during their field studies. It also introduces terminology which is an important part of the discipline, and incorporates a brief discussion of ethics in research and the rights of cultures that are the subject of research. The module explores some of the more common terms which are found in scientific articles with the hope that professional journals or publications can then be made more understandable to introductory students.

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## FIELDWORK

Research in cultural anthropology traditionally has been conducted via PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION, in which the anthropologist resides and participates with the community being studied. Fieldwork is generally regarded as an attempt on the part of the anthropologist to faithfully record the culture of a selected group. However, there is a major difference between detached observation of a group, and overt participation in a culture. It would be preposterous to assume that anthropologists can become full-fledged members of all groups observed. Their goal is to penetrate the most visible traits of a culture, in order to unravel the various social relationships and institutional complexes that are the basis of social structure. The value of trying to study a group through overt participation is subject to debate. Some researchers argue that the observer can never achieve full participation in the lifestyle of the group being investigated, and contend that this absence of true assimilation means that all the observer sees and records is too subjective, regardless of the observer's attempts to remain objective. Others believe that the anthropologist can successfully penetrate the external, surface barriers between the researcher and the culture being recorded by living with the group for a significant length of time.

As strangers in exotic lands, anthropologists

frequently encounter depression, anxiety, fear, disorientation, and a host of other physiological and psychological problems. Medical emergencies are particularly troublesome to fieldworkers. Anthropologists who become ill while working in isolated areas must meet their own medical needs, or else rely upon the folk-medicine of the group being studied. The number of exotic illnesses fieldworkers are exposed to is large; fortunately, most of these conditions are non-fatal--a fact that is of little consolation to one who is far from home and very uncomfortable. At such times, the wisdom of one's career choice is likely to be questioned; the key is to be physically and psychologically prepared before engaging in fieldwork. One must expect that a degree of discomfort, loss of privacy, and illness will accompany most field assignments. Friendship, warmth, compassion and a clearer understanding of one's own strengths and limits can also result. It is unfortunate that many anthropologists wait until their graduate years before engaging in fieldwork, a practice which denies them the opportunity to "reality test" their career choice, or to realistically assess their aptitude and tolerance for fieldwork.

ACADEMIC PREPARATION for a career in anthropology traditionally has involved years of studying a selected culture area in order to learn as much as possible about a group prior to engaging in actual field research. Reading about a specific cultural group without having concurrent

field experience of the group may cause the student to internalize any misconceptions or subjective observations contained in the literature. When the anthropologist actually contacts the group in question, the image conveyed in the writing of previous observers may greatly conflict with real conditions. Ideally, the anthropologist is able to separate the imgages contained in monographs published by earlier observers from the reality of the cultural group in its contemporary state. The rapidity of culture change, and the plethora of monographs available on certain culture groups make it essential that the student combine mastery of classic literature with actual field observation.

A comprehension of the LANGUAGE of the group under observation is a necessary part of preparing for fieldwork. To rely upon translators is to place a barrier between oneself and informants. In addition, some aspects of culture must be symbolically experienced in order to be fully appreciated. Not all anthropologists become fluent in the language of their chosen groups. Some anthropologists believe that the best way to learn a language is to mimic the way a child learns--immersing oneself in a culture without the security of translators forces one to learn quickly in order to communicate about one's basic needs. The type of fieldwork being conducted, and the specific problem under study help the anthropologist determine the degree of language mastery necessary to succesful research.

Considerable advance planning and negotiation often precedes fieldwork. Obtaining OFFICIAL PERMISSION to travel into remote areas can often involve the anthropologist in months of tedious correspondence and require considerable diplomacy. One aspect that is often difficult to arrange in advance is the securing of PERMISSION FROM THE CULTURAL GROUP to be studied. This courtesy often has been overlooked by anthropologists whose attention to the theoretical aspects of their research has diverted their attention from more mundane, people-oriented preparations. Anthropologists have often conducted research among people whose homelands were colonized by foreign powers. Rather than seeking the consent and cooperation of the group to be studied, researchers traditionally relied upon the permission of colonial officials who had the power to control the lives of the indigenous people, and thus could require them to submit to research projects.

In many ways, this was an overt form of exploitation on the part of the anthropologists. Colonial officials often abused the rights and dignity of subjugated people by characterizing their customs and beliefs as quaint vestigal remnants of a primordial past. Ironically, many anthropologists and colonists believed that primitive cultures had to be studied in order to be protected from the encroachment and influence of the less honorable denizens of contemporary western societies. The majority of early anthropologists were apolitical in that they did not

participate in any strong or concerted action to reduce the exploitation of primitive people. As a consequence, fieldwork often was skewed in support of the continuation of the status quo, and the scope of research tended to be limited to governmentally sanctioned topics. Few monographs included descriptions of the day-to-day conditions of people suffering from the effects of poverty, disease, alienation and oppression.

In the past, many anthropologists placed major emphasis upon reconstructing models of extinct cultures. Monographs tended to illustrate cultures as they had been in earlier times, and to ignore contemporary conditions. As a consequence, inaccurate images of cultures were recorded and dispersed to academic enclaves. These descriptions were sometimes popularized, and from them the general public developed distorted images of strange and exotic cultures, totally out of synchronization with actual time and reality. Fieldworkers have a moral and ethical duty to provide not only a historical profile, but also a realistic account of current conditions affecting the group being researched. One can only wonder at the behavior of some anthropologists who supposedly believed in the rights of their research subjects and who decried ethnocentricity and discrimination, yet were oblivious to the implications of their position as "experts" on the cultural heritage of "Third World" peoples. The implication was that people in these cultural areas had not developed sufficiently academically or intellectually

to record their own cultures.

There are a number of hard philosophical and ethical questions regarding fieldwork and monographs which should be considered. For instance, should fieldwork which ignores the oppressed state of a group be undertaken? If one intends to conduct research on the Bantus of South Africa, is it appropriate to render a monograph which only addresses their traditional kinship system, or does the anthropologist also have a moral obligation to report on their present condition as well? Some anthropologists have suggested that academic and professional contact with despotic governments merely reinforces the position of the exploiters. Others argue that communication is the only way in which change can be achieved; to break off professional contact would be to isolate not only the oppressors but also the oppressed.

The development of a CONFLICT APPROACH within Western Anthropology has forced a reconsideration of many of these moral issues. Conflict theorists argue for a wholistic approach which includes recording data on the cultural position of a group relative to all areas which interface. There has been resistance to this approach within the discipline; anthropologists who embrace the conflict perspective are generally reagarded as an inconvenience which many governments would rather avoid. The traditional anthropologist does not usually encounter the same resistance and restrictions when arranging to do fieldwork. It will be

interesting to observe which philosophical perspective will have the greatest impact on fieldwork. Students of anthropology often are not given any preparation regarding professional ethics. As a result, they often lack guidelines as to what is appropriate or inappropriate in conducting research. Any research which involves people should be designed to preserve the rights and dignity of human subjects. The people being studied should never be the subject of ridicule or scorn in subsequent monographs. Nor should informants, other individuals, or communities be placed in awkward situations as a result of fieldwork or resulting publications or reports. Participant permission and informed consent are important; both should come from the group which is under observation. The main rule to observe in the field is: the people you study are neither journal articles, nor footnotes, nor statistics, nor charts--they are people. Respect them!

After permission to conduct fieldwork has been obtained, a number of additional preparations must be made. The fieldworker must compose and evaluate a basic research strategy for use in gathering and analyzing information. The diversity of subdivisions within anthropology and the need for specific categories of information account for the variation in fieldwork methodologies. An anthropologist doing linguistic analysis would approach a group in a somewhat different manner than a social anthropologist specializing in social organization.

The GENERAL ETHNOGRAPHIC MODEL for fieldwork is favored by most anthropologists. It is based on the natural science approach, in that the total life-ways of a group are observed. This implies that a basic ethnographic design containing the various categories of human behavior is developed in advance. In the field, these categories are observed and recorded. The primary danger in this approach is that one might alter a behavior to fit into a preconceived category and be unaware of the distortion. This is a problem with all taxonomies. The anthropologist attempts to obtain what is called an ETHNOGRAPHIC CUT, i.e., a cross section of the culture. The smaller the group, the better the chances of obtaining an accurate picture.

How does one go about obtaining information from a people who usually have good reason to regard a stranger as a potential enemy, or as the symbol of their defeat? It would be fair to say that anthropologists are often regarded by native peoples as rather curious specimens. How would the average Westerner react to a stranger with unusual physical features, who speaks an exotic language, and wears funny clothes? Compound the possible responses by adding that this stranger does not appear to work. Indeed, here is an adult who suddenly moves into one's backyard and expects to be furnished with intimate details of one's private life, tales about one's relatives and the most boring details of everyday life. The wonder of fieldwork is that it succeeds at all.

Anthropologists are usually tolerated in foreign areas more easily than in their own society. Some authors contend that primitive people are emotionally moved by the fieldworker who in many instances appears more helpless than a child. Others argue that people perceive the anthropologist as being connected in some way to the government. It matters not whether an actual connection exists; if it exists in the subjective reality of the group, they will act accordingly. Thus, a possible identification with power and authority sometimes taints the researcher. This in turn may trigger a series of entering roles and reactions that can influence the tenor of fieldwork for a long period.

Charm, likeability, friendliness and an ability to adjust to complex and different social situations contribute to the degree of success an anthropologist experiences. There is no single method of doing research with a group. Each group has its own unique characteristics, and each researcher will have to use trial and error, together with intuition, to establish rapport. Fieldwork is something which cannot be taught didactically--one can expose students to methodology, but actual field experience is essential. There is no teacher like exposure to the real thing, i.e., cross cultural diversity.

One of the first items that anthropologists try to ascertain is the size of the group being studied. They take a CENSUS. In addition, they generally construct maps showing the territory of the group, including the important

cultural and physical features of the area. The process of interviewing group members is done both formally and informally. An informal interview is more open than a structured interview which always has a set of underlying questions the anthropologist is seeking to answer. There are real difficulties in obtaining many types of data. The primary reason being that many traits are not shared or discussed across sex lines, nor are some shared or discussed with strangers. The fieldworker attempts to establish relationships with group members to gain their trust and support. These guides to the culture are called INFORMANTS. Sometimes informants tell the anthropologist what they think he or she wants to hear. The problem of informant distortion is common to all social sciences. In addition, informants may not be reliable accepted members of the group, and may represent only one sex or age cluster. In order for the study to be valid, a wide variety of informants should be included.

As group members gain confidence in the fieldworker and the fieldworker develops familiarity with the language, greater rapport is achieved. This allows the anthropologist to probe beyond the surface areas of the culture and investigate the core of cultural behavior. It is not uncommon for fieldworkers to be put through psychological tests by a group. Teasing, joking, mock violence and "phony" rituals may be utilized to test the breaking point of an anthropologist. It is an extremely difficult position

to be in, trying to win the confidence of a group while asserting one's own strength within a setting wherein an unfamiliar set of cultural responses are appropriate.

The recording of KINSHIP is a fundamental step in traditional research. The object is to determine how social, political, economic and reciprocal relationships operate within a group. Usually during this process, life histories of subjects are revealed. These serve as chronological descriptions of the life-stages people experience, and are frequently used to describe the expected behavior of age peers and other group members. For rather obvious reasons, questionnaires are not used; however, formal interview schedules are commonly employed. The use of the interview schedule lends itself to a more accurate and complete analysis of certain types of data from a statistical standpoint.

The administration of PSYCHOLOGICAL TESTING across cultural barriers is rather problematic. Oral and visual projective tests have been used by some researchers, but the technique is not endorsed by most anthropologists. For the results to be valid, the ethnographic information gathered on a culture would have to be exceedingly detailed and complex; from this data, a test based upon behavior within the group might be constructed. To apply a test designed for one group to a radically different group compromises the validity of the test.

The application of TECHNOLOGY for cultural recording

is now becoming more common. The use of tape recorders, video tapes, and/or movie cameras allows the fieldworker to accumulate an audio-visual record of the culture. Visual anthropology has developed as a legitimate sub-area of anthropological research. Unfortunately, in many habitats the extremes of climate tend to play havoc with complex and delicate equipment. The major advantage of audio-visual recording is that it allows fieldworkers to review the data-gathering process. Others also can review the ethnographic material and gain unique insights not available solely through written monographs. One difficulty with this technique is that if one spends too much time recording and filming, opportunities for interviewing and personal contact tend to diminish.

Many anthropologists keep JOURNALS of their experiences in order to more fully understand the psychological and emotional problems encountered in performing fieldwork. This allows a degree of introspection for the returning fieldworker; by noting one's mood and tenor during different research phases, it is possible to partially compensate for some of the more subjective interpretations which are made in the field. The journals of anthropologists are fascinating in that many cover the gamut of human experiences. Journal-keeping should be formally included as an area of academic preparation for aspiring anthropologists.

Small COMPUTERS and terminals have opened up new avenues for fieldwork. Today, home computers are within

the budget of most anthropologists. As a consequence the analysis and composition of fieldwork will undergo changes which will have enormous implications for the discipline. When complex statistical analysis and related techniques fall within the grasp of a majority of researchers, the overall quality of fieldwork will increase. The use of data networks will allow anthropologists to research information on specific topics from their home or school terminals. Access to exotic or scarce archival materials will open up the amount of information which anthropologists can generate for backgroup related to their area of fieldwork.

Anthropologists are expected to know STATISTICAL analysis and the methodologies which relate to the formulation of research problems and their evaluation. It will be virtually impossible to practice anthropology without a background in statistics. Basic areas, such as the comprehension of journal articles depend upon an awareness of research methodology. The following is a concise gathering of terms which are found in such articles:

1. MEAN: Arithmetic average.
2. MODE: Most frequently occurring trait.
3. MEDIAN: Midpoint of a distribution.
4. FREQUENCY: Number of times for a trait to occur.
5. DISTRIBUTION: Process whereby the individual frequencies of traits are displayed.
6. STANDARD DEVIATION: A measure of variation within a distribution.

7. PROBABILITY: A concept that examines whether a relationship relates to pure chance or whether a cause and effect relationship be uncovered.
8. >: Greater than.
9. <: Less than.
10. NULL HYPOTHESIS: A format which states that no significant difference will exist between the means of two groups (most research problems are stated using a null hypothesis).
11. LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE: The amount of error or room for error which exists within a specific study.
12. CRITICAL VALUE: The established point at which the null hypothesis is declared as invalid. If the results exceed the critical value at the established level, the null hypothesis is rejected.
13. CORRELATION: The measurement that determines whether a link exists between two or more traits.

Fieldwork is a means of satisfying the need to gain information from a living culture. Anthropologists traditionally have concentrated their studies among less complex, non-western cultures. Increasingly, contemporary western societies are being researched as well. Anthropologists are beginning to examine their own cultures using many of the strategies developed for surveying non-western groups. As this trend has developed, the distinction between anthropological and sociological research specialties has diminished, with researchers from both disciplines concurrently studying many of the same groups.

## Performance Activities

Please fill in the blanks:

1. Research in cultural anthropology makes use of P_____ O_____.
2. A_____ P_____ for a career in anthropology generally involves years of study.
3. A comprehension of the L_____ of the group is necessary for fieldwork.
4. O_____ P_____ can often involve the anthropologist in months of tedious correspondence.
5. P_____ from the cultural group is also necessary if ethical considerations are to be upheld.
6. A C_____ approach has forced a reconsideration of moral issues related to fieldwork.
7. The general E_____ model for fieldwork is based upon the natural science approach.
8. An E_____ cut is considered as a cross section of a culture.
9. A C_____ is a measurement of the size of a group.
10. Guides to the respective cultures are termed I_____.
11. K_____ recording is an essential step within research.
12. Psychological T_____ is considered as very problematic from a cross-cultural perspective.
13. T_____ applied to fieldwork involves the use of films, video tapes and recorders.
14. Most anthropologists keep J_____ of their experiences in order to more fully comprehend the psychological and emotional problems encountered in performing fieldwork.
15. Small C_____ and terminals have opened up new avenues for research.
16. Anthropologists are expected to know S_____ analysis.

17. The M_____ is the arithmetic average of a distribution.

18. The M_____ is the most frequently occurring trait within a distribution.

19. The M_____ is the midpoint of a distribution.

20. The F_____ is the number of times a specific trait occurs.

21. The S_____ D_____ is a measurement of variation within a distribution.

22. P_____ is a concept that examines whether chance or a cause and effect relationship exists.

23. > is the symbol for G_____ than.

24. < is the symbol for L_____ than.

25. Null hypothesis states that no S_____ difference will exist between the means of two or more groups.

26. Level of S_____ is the amount of error which exists within a specific study.

27. Critical V_____ is the established point at which the null hypothesis is rejected.

28. C_____ is the measurement that determines whether a link exists between two or more traits.



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